At FBI, Pressure Rises for Chief to Quit

Clinton Spokesman Calls Ethics Report on Sessions 'Disturbing'

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By Sharon LaFraniere
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Pressure mounted yesterday within the FBI for Director William S. Sessions to resign because of alleged ethical abuses that a White House spokesman criticized as "precisely the kinds of violations and abuse of privilege that . . . President Clinton is committed to changing."

George Stephanopoulos, President Clinton's spokesman, said the White House counsel's office would review the findings of the Justice Department's ethics office that accused Sessions of repeatedly abusing FBI rules on use of cars, planes, personnel and funds. But he added, "I have to say that the report is disturbing."

Some senior FBI officials privately expressed hope that Sessions, who voiced confidence in an FBI meeting Tuesday that he could withstand the controversy, would step down immediately without waiting for White House reaction. "We're talking about degrees of bad, but that would be better than fighting," said the special agent in charge of one FBI field office.

Others, such as Oliver B. Revell, the FBI's former No. 3 official, said Sessions deserves a chance to defend himself. But "if he cannot show our new president that he has conducted himself in an ethical and honorable fashion, he should resign," said Revell, who now heads the FBI's Dallas office.

In another sign of turmoil within the bureau, Sessions has cut short the tenure of Ray and LeRoy Jahn, a well-liked husband-and-wife team who were detailed from a U.S. attorney's office in San Antonio last year to serve as his special assistants. The Jahns were brought in to

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improve the operation of Sessions's office and quickly gained the respect of FBI's top management.

Some FBI officials said the Jahns, who have long known Sessions, lost favor with him after they criticized his former executive assistant, Sarah W. Munford. Munford was fired last week for misusing her position. "They were honest brokers, the only ones who could credibly portray to him the problems Sarah was causing him," one mid-level FBI official said.

Another senior FBI official said the Jahns felt thwarted in their mission and wanted to leave early. Their year-long detail was to end this April but could have been extended, according to Ron Ederer, the U.S. attorney in San Antonio. Ederer said yesterday the Jahns decided to return to their jobs as prosecutors in his office before the Clinton administration chose a new U.S. attorney there.

Sessions, who is midway through a 10-year term, serves at the president's pleasure, according to the history of the legislation that established the 10-year appointment. The president has the authority to remove an FBI director at any time, for any reason, the sponsor of the law told Congress when the legislation was passed in 1976.

FBI managers view the 10-year term as a protection against political influence and worry that if Sessions resigns, he will set a precedent for appointing a new FBI director every time an administration changes. Yet a number of officials said Sessions, who has never enjoyed wide respect among agents, cannot remain at an organization that prides itself on its professionalism.

"You have a lot of people with very divided loyalties," said one former FBI official with continuing ties to FBI headquarters. "There's support for the position, but not for the person," one senior FBI official said.

In the FBI's far-flung field offices, some FBI officials were still trying to learn the details of the scathing report on Sessions issued Tuesday by department's Office of Professional Responsibility (OPR). "There's a lot of 'what's going on?' " said one FBI official.

Several FBI officials gave the criticism credence specifically because it comes from the OPR, an office that has taken on three attorneys general and a former FBI director. Michael Shaheen, who heads OPR, "can't be manipulated" by politics, said one FBI official.

But another field office director who expressed confidence in Sessions said, "I've seen the way OPR

works, and the notion of fairness is not very important."

Sessions's wife, Alice, has suggested to the San Antonio Light, her hometown newspaper, that disloyal FBI officials orchestrated the OPR probe. In his Tuesday meeting with top FBI executives, Sessions tried to dispel the impression he distrusts his senior staff members and voiced hope that they would continue to support him, FBI officials said.

Still, some FBI officials said Sessions appears to be excluding from some discussions Deputy Director Floyd I. Clarke, who has long been viewed as the FBI's lifeline to the Justice Department.

Sessions, who has described the OPR report as full of errors and mistaken conclusions, is hard at work with his lawyers on a point-by-point rebuttal, according to FBI chief spokesman John Collingwood.

Stephanopoulos said, "We want to make sure we're heard all sides on this before we make any final judgment. But there appears to be, according to this report, some sort of pattern of practice."